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ABSTRACT

In addition to making recommendations for more effective coordination of Early Childhood Services (ECS) in Alberta, Canada, this document assesses a 3-year pilot study in which five regional coordinating committees were granted funds to increase the coordination of services in their regions. Evaluation data were collected from the committees and agencies through interviews, questionnaires, observations, and document analyses at the beginning, midterm, and end of a 2-year evaluation period. Parents were contacted at the end of the evaluation period in June 1983. The regional coordinating committees had been given very general guidelines and therefore varied widely in the number and background of their members, the frequency of their meetings, and the direction and form of their activities. While all committees used part of their funds to hire a regional coordinator, the role and responsibilities of each coordinator also varied. The committees additionally were evaluated in terms of their accomplishment of planning, communication, and action goals; their effectivenesss in organizing work and developing human resources; and their success in increasing the level of coordination activities in their regions. Fourteen specific conclusions about committee problems, recommendations for their improvement, and the rationales behind the recommendations conclude the summary. (CB)

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Early Childhood Services Coordination Evaluation

Executive Summary

PS 014574

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THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES COORDINATION EVALUATION

Executive Summary

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A Study Conducted Under Contract to
Alberta Education
Edmonton, Alberta

September, 1983

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES COORDINATION EVALUATION

Executive Summary

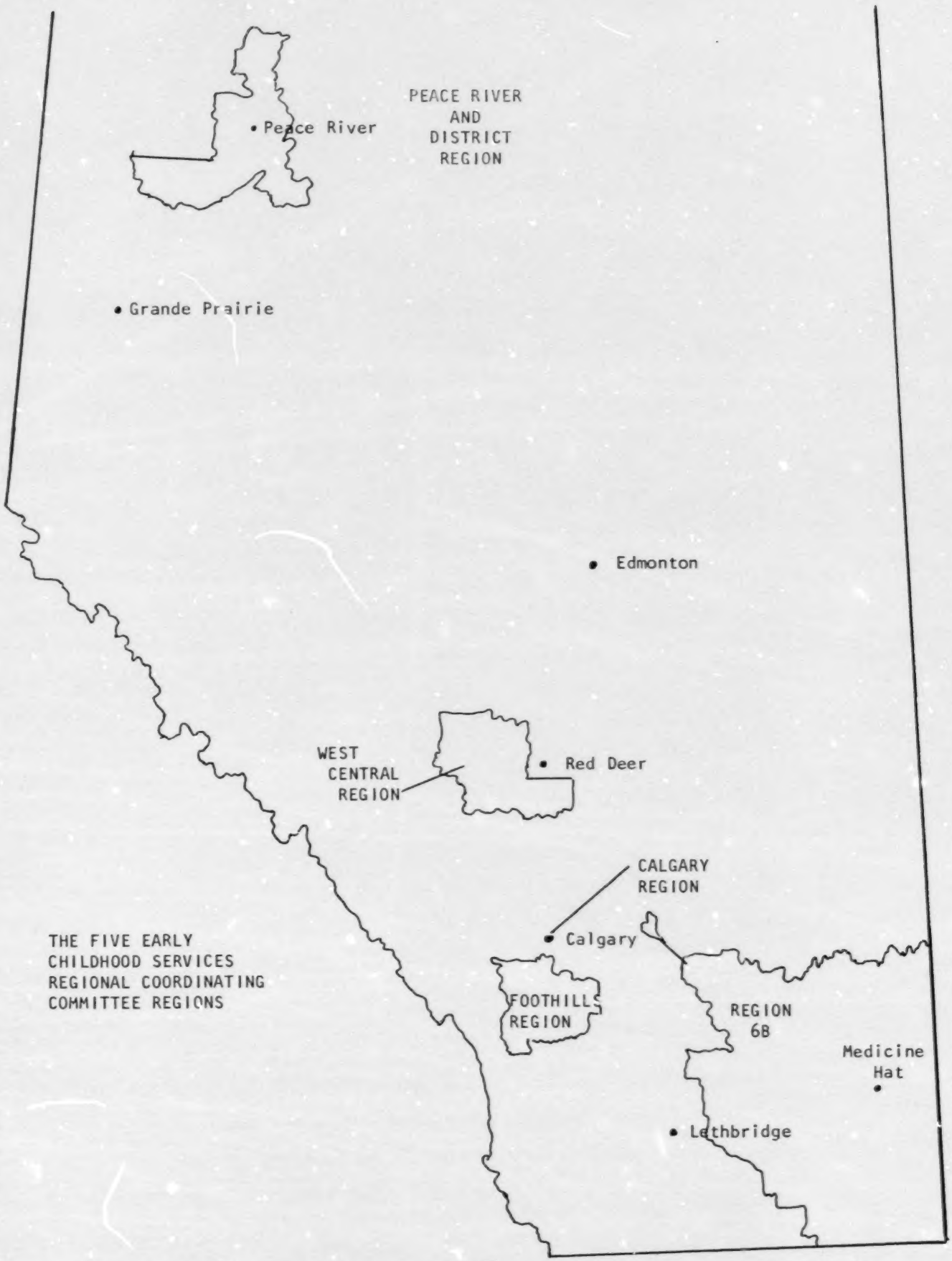
Overview

Alberta Education launched a pilot study in 1980 into means of increasing coordination of services for young children and families in the province. Coordination of services for young children and families had been part of the overall plan for Early Childhood Services when the program began in 1973. The 1978 Evaluation of the Early Childhood Services Program found that the coordination of services area needed to be strengthened at all levels but particularly at the regional level.

To this end, five regional coordinating committees were granted monies in a three-year pilot study to increase the coordination of services in their region. The committees were given some broad guidelines and encouraged to coordinate complementary services according to their own needs. Each committee received a yearly grant calculated according to the number of Early Childhood Services (ECS) operators and local ECS centres served by the committee. The total coordination grant for the five committees over three years was approximately $300,000.

Harvey Social Research Ltd. was awarded a contract in April 1981 to evaluate the pilot project. The management consulting services of McQ Enterprises Ltd. were acquired to assist with the evaluation.

The methodological approach for the study was a longitudinal in-depth case analysis using interviews, questionnaires, observations and document analysis procedures. Data were collected at the beginning, mid term and end of the two-year evaluation period from committees and agencies. Parents were contacted at the conclusion of the study in June 1983. The primary consultant attended meetings of each committee on three occasions and collected minutes, committee documents and reports on current projects throughout the study.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WEST
CENTRAL
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FOOTHILLS
REGION
REGION
6B
Medicine
Hat
• Lethbridge
THE FIVE EARLY
CHILDHOOD SERVICES
REGIONAL COORDINATING
COMMITTEE REGIONS

The major factors addressed in all case studies were Committee Background, Coordination of Projects and Activities, Achievement of Goals, Committee Effectiveness, and Level of Coordination Assessment. The case studies are summarized below on each of the major factors.

Committee Background

Of the five committees studied, the Calgary Community Operators was a large committee, Region 6B was fairly large, Peace River & District and West Central were fairly small and Foothills was a small committee. The average driving distance one-way for members to attend meetings varied from 15.6 kilometres in Calgary to 97.0 kilometres in Region 6B. Three committees met monthly during the ECS year, one met bi-monthly and one met twice a year. The Region 6B Committee had a two-tiered structure with coordination activities at both the regional level and the sub-regional level.

Four of the committees had been meeting for a considerable time before the pilot project began. The Peace River & District Committee was formed at the beginning of the project. Three committees filled their executive positions with individuals who did not have full-time employment outside the home; two filled at least half their executive positions with individuals who did hold full-time salaried positions. The cost of obtaining space for committee meetings varied from nominal rates to no cost.

Coordination of Projects and Activities

All the committees used part of their coordination funds to hire a regional coordinator with the exception of Region 6B where four sub-regional coordinators were hired. Costs associated with the regional coordinator position varied from a high of 80 percent to a low of 22 percent of total yearly expenses.

In the Foothills, Peace River, and Region 6B committees, the regional or sub-regional coordinators were largely responsible for the accomplishment of coordination activities. On the Calgary committee, the executive played a significant role in addition to that of the coordinator. On the West Central committee, sub-committees that included one executive member worked with the coordinator on major coordination projects.

Coordination projects and activities varied widely across and within committees in scope, clientele directly served and involvement of service agencies. Clientele included children, parents, teachers and community. West Central's projects were mainly long-term and directed towards programs and services for children in the ECS centres. It hired a Special Needs Coordinator and a Media Coordinator in addition to the Administrative Coordinator. Parents were the principal direct recipients of coordination activities in Foothills; parents and teachers were the principal direct recipients in Peace River and Region 6B. Calgary put their emphasis on reaching clientele through the committee members.

Coordination projects and activities included workshops organized by the regional or sub-regional committee, workshops with regional committee involvement, sending delegates to workshops, liaison activities, petitions and lobbying, financial assistance, and "other projects."

Four of the committees had a few service agency representatives who attended meetings on a regular basis. The West Central Committee interacted with service agencies through sub-committees. Many of the coordination projects in all committees involved one or more service agencies.

Only one committee involved its members to a high degree in a combined planning-budgeting process. One committee encountered some difficulties in handling Coordination Grant funds.

Achievement of Goals

Committees were evaluated on the achievement of their own coordination goals and on the achievement of the Provincial Program Goals. The Provincial Goals had a planning orientation whereas the committee goals were mainly action-oriented. The Region 6B and Peace River committees included a planning function in their committee goals. Comprehensive plans for coordination of programs and services were not found in any committee. Accomplishment of committee goals varied from extensive accomplishment to making a start towards accomplishment. Communication goals were achieved more than any others across all committees.

Committee Effectiveness

Communication was a positive feature of four committees. Planning and control aspects were strong in the West Central Committee, as were organization of work and development of human resources. These aspects needed some strengthening in three of the committees and were a serious problem in the Peace River Committee. Understanding of the committee's purpose was limited in all cases.

Level of Coordination Assessment

It was concluded that the level of coordination activities increased very significantly as a result of the Coordination Grant for the West Central Committee. It was concluded that the level of activities increased significantly for the Calgary, Foothills, and Region 6B Committees. And it was concluded that from the start-up of the Peace River Committee at the beginning of the pilot project, the level of increase in coordination activities was significant.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on this two-year evaluation of five ECS Coordinating Committees, the following Conclusions and Recommendations were developed. The general conclusion from the study is presented first. A conclusion directed towards reassessment of the Provincial Program Goals follows. The remaining conclusions and recommendations apply not only to the committees included in the study but also to future committees receiving funding for coordination purposes.

Study Conclusion: It was concluded that the level of coordination activities increased significantly for four committees and very significantly for one committee as a result of the Coordination Grant.

Study Recommendation: That funding for coordination purposes be made available for all ECS Coordinating Committees in Alberta.

Conclusion 1: The Provincial Program Goals for Coordination focus on planning for coordination of programs and services.

Recommendation 1: *That the Provincial Program Goals for Coordination be revised to include an implementation of plans component for coordinating committees.*

Comment: The implementation function of coordinating committees is an important aspect of their work as a follow-up to the planning function. Currently more progress has been made in implementation of micro-level plans for coordination than in any macro-level planning.

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Conclusion 2: None of the committees gave evidence of having developed a comprehensive long-term plan for coordination of services in their region.

Recommendation 2: *That committees be assisted to understand and implement a long-term planning process.*

Comment: A long-term plan is a clear expectation of goals for the Coordination Grant. Of equal importance is the fact that long-term plans provide a context for selection of activities and expenditure of funds. It helps to ensure that all committee efforts are directed toward the stated committee goals.

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Conclusion 3: The one new coordinating committee in the study was working on the basic tasks of learning how to function as a committee. Without an effective committee

structure in place, coordination efforts were largely limited to what could be accomplished by the administrative coordinator.

Recommendation 3: *That a coordinating committee meet a set of eligibility standards for functioning as a committee before receiving coordination funding.*

Comment: Eligibility standards for functioning as a committee should include evidence of holding monthly meetings of the whole committee, holding an election of officers, defining responsibilities and duties of executive positions and committee members, and defining common needs of committee members. The trial period should be for a minimum of one year or longer if needed to meet the eligibility standards.

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Conclusion 4: Although there was great variety in coordination projects and activities undertaken during the study, the basic coordination projects that all committees undertook involved a coordinator and the assembling of handbooks, reference lists, and the development of basic communication channels. Essential costs were those associated with the coordinator and various forms of communication.

Recommendation 4: *That coordinating committees be provided with basic funding for coordination staff and for essential operating costs such as photocopying and postage.*

Comment: A range for a standard part-time monthly wage should be agreed upon for all coordinating committees. A basic amount for essential operating costs should also be set. Additional funds for special coordination projects could be assigned at the discretion of ECS Zone Consultants.

Conclusion 5: Committees require a higher level of funding to develop and establish coordination than they do to maintain it.

Recommendation 5: *That a higher level of coordination funding be provided for the first three years a committee receives grant funds.*

Comment: Start-up costs are a reality with coordinating committees and include such items as developing lists of resources, handbooks on committee operation, formats for calendars, logos, newsletters etc. and organization of existing resources for exchange among programs. There is also more footwork for the coordinator of a new committee in seeking out services and supplies needed by participating programs.

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Conclusion 6: The guidelines for the spending of the Coordination Grant were very broad. Each committee gradually developed its own set of permissible expenses.

Recommendation 6: *That a clear set of guidelines be established concerning eligible expenses beyond the basic costs.*

Comment: The guidelines should address such issues as the following: coordinator's wages; purchase of large office and audio-visual equipment; purchase of audio-visual software; playground equipment and musical instruments; travel and subsistence; consultant and professional fees; honoraria to executive committee members; and office rental.

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Conclusion 7: The disbursement of coordination grant funds was not always clear to committee members.

Recommendation 7: *That committee treasurers be required to receive approval from a committee quorum for a detailed annual budget as well as all disbursements over a determined amount.*

Comment: Committee members will feel more actively involved in committee decision-making if they have the opportunity to vote their approval of major expenses. Any difficulties in handling funds can be addressed as soon as they arise when major disbursements are brought to the committee for approval.

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Conclusion 8: Committees accomplished the most coordination when committee members worked with the coordinator rather than leaving the coordinator to work largely on her own.

Recommendation 8: *That the roles of part-time coordinator and of committee members be clarified by each committee so that they complement each other.*

Comment: The optimum combination of efforts of volunteers and paid staff requires direct attention on a frequent basis.

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Conclusion 9: The process of developing an effective committee structure in a new committee is a slow process without inservice for members.

Recommendation 9: *That new committees receive inservice programs on effective committee functioning. In particular, member and executive responsibilities, working with a staff person and using sub-committees should be included.*

Comment: The effective use of sub-committees and working with a staff person are topics that some of the ongoing committees might consider for workshops or equivalent delivery methods.

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Conclusion 10: Persons in executive positions who held full-time salaried positions were often given too much deference by committee members in the decision-making process.

Recommendation 10: *That preference be given to persons without full-time employment outside the home in filling executive positions on committees.*

Comment: One way to make committee members feel more equal is to fill executive positions with people who do not have full-time employment outside the home. The potential for leadership development is also greater when people without full-time employment outside the home hold executive positions than when professionals do. The development of leadership is implicit in ECS philosophy.

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Conclusion 11: Committees that met on a monthly basis through the ECS year had more momentum in their activities than committees who met less frequently.

Recommendation 11: *That committees meet on a monthly basis throughout the ECS year.*

Comment: Some committees were reluctant to schedule monthly meetings because of driving distance and the possibility of bad weather. However, if a majority of members have no more than a half hour's travelling time to attend

meetings, it should be possible to have a quorum at most, if not all, meetings throughout the year. Telephone conference calls could be used on alternate months to increase attendance at meetings.

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Conclusion 12: The optimum number of ECS operators represented on coordinating committees was 10 to 15.

Recommendation 12: *That a committee size of 10 to 15 operators be encouraged as a working unit within reasonable geographic limitations.*

Comment: Committees with fewer than 10 operators had a small pool of volunteers from which to draw. Committees with greater than 15 operators had difficulty convincing every member that they needed to contribute to make the committee function at an optimum level. Should a committee choose to use a two-tiered structure, optimum committee size would be determined by the roles of the committees.

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Conclusion 13: A limited amount of twinning done between two of the committees in the study indicated the potential for mutual support and sharing of ideas and experience between two committees.

Recommendation 13: *That all coordinating committees be encouraged to twin with another committee and that new committees be twinned with established committees.*

Comment: Twinning may take the form of sharing minutes, frequent telephone contact between chairpersons, treasurers,

coordinators, etc., and sending delegates to some of the twin committee's meetings. ECS Zone Consultants can provide liaison between committees.

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Conclusion 14: A considerable degree of coordination occurs when ECS representatives and agency representatives meet and talk together. A meeting site is a basic requirement for this exchange to occur.

Recommendation 14: *That coordinating committees be encouraged to seek meeting space that is either low cost or rent-free.*

Comment: Committees that locate meeting space that is either rent-free or at a nominal rental rate are able to continue meeting regardless of budget considerations. Supporting agencies may be able to provide meeting space at no cost.

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